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ABSTRACT

The intention of this theoretical paper is to present a reversal theory interpretation of play phenomena. Reversal theory, a developing theory in psychology, concerns the complex relationship between experience and motivation. One of the central characteristics of the theory is that it attempts to understand why so much of human behavior is apparently unrelated to biological needs. Play is an example of such biologically gratuitous behavior, because it cannot be regarded as imperative for survival. From the standpoint of structural phenomenology, the theory of psychological reversals conceptualizes a number of bi-stable, meta-motivational states which exist as paired opposites. Individuals are considered to be in one or the other of the opposed meta-motivational states at any one time. As the name of the theory implies, reversals from one meta-motivational state to another are possible. One of these pairs, the so-called telic and paratelic meta-motivational pair, is important with respect to play because the behavior characteristics usually associated with the paratelic state are closely aligned with those described by other observers of informal play activities. On occasion, however, especially with more formalized play activities associated with contemporary sport, a telic orientation becomes apparent. This paper expands on the association between playful behavior and meta-motivational state, referring to examples from everyday experience and the views of other play theorists.

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PLAY: THE REVERSAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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PLAY: THE REVERSAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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The intention of this theoretical paper is to present a reversal theory interpretation of play phenomena.

Reversal theory, a relatively new and developing theory in psychology, concerns itself with the complex relationship between experience and motivation. One of the central characteristics of the theory is that it attempts to understand why so much of human behaviour is apparently unrelated to biological needs. Play is an example of behaviour which can be classified as biologically gratuitous or superfluous, since it cannot be regarded as imperative for survival.

From the standpoint of structural phenomenology, the theory of psychological reversals conceptualises a number of bistable, metamotivational states which exist as paired opposites. Individuals are considered to be in one or other of the opposed metamotivational states at any one time. As is implied from the name of the theory, reversals from one metamotivational state to another are possible.

One of these pairs, the so-called telic and paratelic metamotivational pair, is important with respect to play. The characteristics of behaviour usually associated with the paratelic state are closely aligned with those described by other observers of informal play activities. On occasions, however, especially with more formalised play activities associated with contemporary sport, a telic orientation becomes apparent.

This paper expands on the association between playful behaviour and metamotivational state, referring to examples from everyday experience and the views of other play theorists.

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Motivation has long been a subject for study amongst psychologists and has developed considerably since the earliest ideas on the importance of basic human drives. Whilst to a certain extent these notions are still valuable, they do not really provide an adequate explanation of complex human behaviour that goes beyond that required for the satisfaction of biological needs. Just over twenty years ago, Berlyne (1964) pointed out that:

"... in higher animals, a great deal of time is spent on . . . activities that are placed under such headings as 'curiosity' and 'play' and bear no obvious and immediate relation to familiar, 'organic' motives. Experimental work has revealed that the likelihood of these activities and the directions that they take depend largely on factors like novelty, surprisingness and complexity of external stimulation." (p. 449).

One theory which attempts to deal with complex human behaviour and the kinds of factors mentioned by Berlyne is the theory of psychological reversals. Smith and Apter, the originators, published their first paper in 1975. In the intervening period, the theory has been used to interpret paradoxical and gratuitous behaviour, neurotic behaviour and responses to stress. In addition, its applications have included psychological analysis of a number of aspects of everyday life, such as family life (Apter and Smith 1979), humour (Apter 1982a), art (Apter 1984), religion (Hyers 1985) and sport (Kerr 1985).

As a theory of motivation, reversal theory¹ concerns itself with the intricate relationship between experience and motivation and the considerable inconsistency of human behaviour. This means that, if the individual's experience of motivation and the resultant actions are to be understood, emotional and cognitive factors must also be taken into consideration. In addition, with the central element of subjective experience and meaning, this also means that the conceptual base of theory is phenomenological. Since the theory attempts to provide a structural framework or pattern for this experience, the theory is conceptualised as structural phenomenology (see Apter 1981). As such, it focusses on "the different ways in which the contents of experience are interpreted by the individual, rather than on the contents themselves." (Apter 1982b).

¹It is not appropriate here to provide a comprehensive description of reversal theory in this short paper; readers should consult Apter (1982b) for a more detailed account.

Rather than incorporating a homeostatic system, which is often used in the understanding of action, reversal theory utilises the idea of a "multistable" system, borrowed from cybernetics. The theory incorporates a specific type of multistable system, the "bistable" system, which, in simple terms, operates rather like a light switch. Here there are two alternative, stable, preferred states between which the system can operate at any particular time. Positions in between these two stable states are considered unstable.

The concept of bistability is particularly important when used in conjunction with the concept of metamotivational states, another fundamental building block of reversal theory. These "phenomenological states are characterised by a certain way of interpreting some aspect or aspects of one's own motivation" (Apter 1982b). Metamotivational states exist together as paired opposites in what might be termed a metamotivational system. Individuals are thought to be in one or other of the opposed states at any one time. However, because of the bistable nature of the system, a switch or reversal from one state to the other is always possible. These reversals, which are often triggered by particular aspects of the environment or biological functioning, can last for only a few seconds or longer periods of time.

Four of these sets of metamotivational states have been identified in the theory. These are the telic-paratelic, negativistic-conformist, sympathy-mastery, and allocentric-autocentric pairs. It is the first of these, the telic-paratelic pair, which is of special interest for the study of play.

INSERT FIG. 1

If we examine the behaviour usually associated with individuals whilst they are in these two states, it is very different. In the telic state, the person tends to be serious minded, future, goal and planning oriented, and prefers low levels of arousal. In direct contrast, the paratelic state is characterised by behaviour which is usually enjoyable, playful and not goal oriented in nature. It is spontaneous and present oriented, with high levels of arousal not only preferred, but often deliberately sought after and experienced as pleasant. It should be apparent that there is a rather obvious

similarity between behaviour usually associated with individuals in the paratelic state and that accompanying play. For instance, both Berlyne (1960) and Ellis (1973) recognise that play can be initiated to increase levels of arousal. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and Huizinga (1949) are in agreement that enjoyment is a fundamental element experienced during playful activity. Complementing these findings, lack of commitment to accomplishing goals has also been identified with individuals engaged in play (Ellis 1973 p. 109/110, Huizinga 1949 and Sutton-Smith 1975). All of these are intrinsic to behaviour in the paratelic state.

It is, however, the work of Roger Caillois (1961) which best underlines the connection between play and the paratelic state. In his book "Man, Play and Games" he examined simple adult and children's play and more formal, structured games of force, skill or reasoning. He categorised play into four categories based on his conceptualisation of play as "free, separate uncertain and unproductive". These categories are summarised in Fig. 2.

INSERT FIG. 2

In addition to Caillois' categorisation of play activities into four groups, he has placed the examples he listed in order, along a continuum. At one end of this continuum are activities which he describes as "ludus" activities, characterised by discipline and bound by "arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious conventions". "Paidia" activities are found at the other end of the continuum and are characterised by "turbulence, free improvisation and carefree gaiety".

Examining each category in turn, they can be related to behaviour in the paratelic state. Caillois' first category, "agôn" or competition, encompasses most of the characteristics of contemporary sport. Apter (1984) stated that,

"The institutionalisation of sport into different games with their own rule structures, techniques, venues and history provides a framework which, once entered into, provides a context which tends to induce the paratelic state in participants and spectators."

Here, of course, a number of factors contribute to the pleasantness or enjoyment of the activities, including the uncertain nature of the result, the challenge of two individuals or two teams engaged in competition, the different tactics and strategies involved and the undoubted risks and resultant success or failure taken by players on both sides.

The second categorisation concentrates on games of chance, and here the individual's success is dependent not on himself, but on luck or destiny. A distinctly human activity, natural or required intellectual abilities are overridden by the cards dealt in a particular hand, or the throw of a dice. Brown and Anderson (1983) have shown that gambling activities provide heightened levels of arousal through the thrill of expectation. The results of their work supported the reversal theory approach and here helps to form the link between the paratelic notion and Caillois' classification of games.

"Much paratelic thinking . . . involves make-believe in which things both are and simultaneously, are not what they appear to be. Much of art falls into this category e.g. an actor both is (in some sense) and is not the role he is acting." (Smith and Apter 1975 p. 8)

Evident here is the link to Caillois' grouping, mimicry and simulation. Indeed, it is here that play could arguably be considered to have a biological function, although not essential for survival. The idea of play allowing children to imitate adult behaviour useful in later life is not a new one. Gross, as early as 1898 and 1901, and later Piaget, in 1951 supported this view of play. This is, however, not incompatible with the paratelic concept. Apart from the make believe nature of much of children's paratelic activity, where a child, through simulation and mimicry, can learn adult behaviour, another element is important.

"If activities are undertaken for their own sakes, then they are more likely to be repeated continually than if they are used solely to achieve a goal; in the course of such repetitions skills are developed which allow essential goals to be achieved more readily when the need to do so arises in later life." (Apter 1982b p. 300).

Caillois' last grouping, which he labels "vertigo", contains activities

in which individuals are deliberately seeking a high arousal activity experienced as pleasant excitement. Although the "chance" activities were also excitement seeking, during these activities participants are rather more active, enjoying the sensation of what Caillois describes as "voluptuous panic". Thinking about the attractions of, say, a fun fair, the physical sensations enjoyed by many people are as a result of their being able to overcome the natural limitations placed on their bodies by the force of gravity. This type of behaviour has been recognised for some time by advocates of reversal theory as being usually paratelic in nature and explains why many people indulge in apparently rather dangerous activities like car and motor cycle racing, parachuting or mountaineering (see Kerr 1983 and 1984).

Examining Caillois' four categories, it becomes apparent that three of them; competition, chance and simulation, restricted by the "use of conventions, techniques and utensils", are much more in harmony with ludus activities. In contrast with these, the impulsive, perhaps rather aimless recreation associated with paidia activities at the other end of the continuum form an easy relationship with the vertigo category. Now, comparing the characteristics of "paidia" activities with the characteristics of paratelic type behaviour, a rather similar picture emerges.

INSERT TABLE 1

Consequently, the type of paidia activities described by Caillois as the "spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct" form a basic element in the paratelic concept in reversal theory. "Indeed in its purest form play seems to be an obvious expression of the functioning of the paratelic system." (Apter 1982b p.300).

INSERT FIG. 3

Having drawn out the connection between play and the paratelic state, a degree of caution is required if we include contemporary sports activities. Huizinga (1971) points out that in contemporary sport the play factor has become atrophied due to the increasing trend towards overseriousness. He

states,

"In the case of sport we have an activity nominally known as play but raised to such a pitch of technical organisation and scientific thoroughness that the real play spirit is threatened with extinction." (p. 14).

Once again, there is a degree of consensus here between Huizinga's ideas and reversal theory, because it also takes into account the trend towards seriousness or overseriousness in sports, suggesting that,

"Organised sport which one might at first glance assume to be paratelic, is quite clearly nothing of the kind. The professional footballer the professional golfer or tennis player, takes part in sport with a very definite purpose in mind (financial gain allied to prestige and power)." (Murgatroyd 1981 p. 231).

So, referring back momentarily to the characteristics of telic activity, it seems obvious that, depending on the circumstances, sport, especially at the top level, may take on a very definite telic orientation. Under these telic conditions, sporting activities become increasingly ludic in nature, have little in common with Caillois' paidia activities, and the play element would seem to be extremely restricted or almost non-existent.

In conclusion, my intention in this paper has been to draw attention to the usefulness of reversal theory as a means of interpreting play. It has been difficult to do real justice to many of the theory's concepts in the short time allotted here. Nevertheless, its potential should be recognised. As a relatively new psychological theory, it provides a refreshing approach and a valid interpretation of many facets of human behaviour, including that under discussion here.

TELIC	—————	PARATELIC
NEGATIVISTIC	—————	CONFORMIST
SYMPATHY	—————	MASTERY
ALLOCENTRIC	—————	AUTOCENTRIC

Fig. 1. The four pairs of metamotivational states.

	AGÔN (Competition)	ALEA (Chance)	MIMICRY (Simulation)	ILINX (Vertigo)
PAIDIA Tumult Agitation Immoderate laughter Kite-flying Solitaire Patience Crossword puzzles LUDUS	Racing Wrestling Etc. } not regulated Athletics Boxing, Billiards Fencing, Checkers Football, Chess Contests, Sports in general	Counting-out rhymes Heads or tails Betting Roulette Simple, complex, and continuing lotteries	Children's initiations Games of illusion Tag, Arms Masks, Disguises Theater Spectacles in general	Children "whirling" Horseback riding Swinging Waltzing Volador Traveling carnivals Skiing Mountain climbing Tightrope walking

FIG. 2 CLASSIFICATION OF GAMES (CAILLOIS 1961)

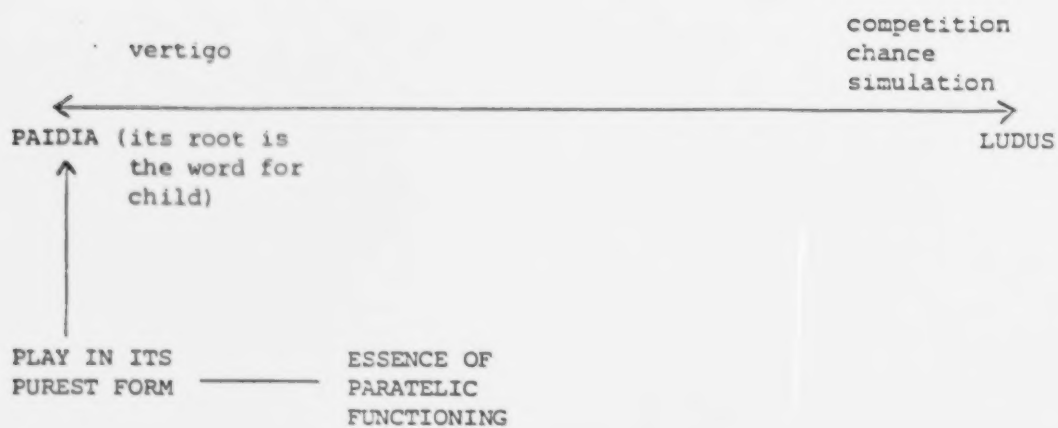


FIG. 3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATEGORIES OF PLAY, PAIDIA AND LUDUS AND THE PARATELIC SYSTEM

TABLE 1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARATELIC STATE AND PAIDIA ACTIVITIES
(FROM APTER 1982 AND CAILLOIS 1961).

PARATELIC	PAIDIA
no essential goals	impromptu and unruly character
freely chosen goals	essential reason for its existence
avoidable goals	
pro active	active
behaviour oriented	disordered agitation
process oriented	
attempts to prolong activity	
present oriented	immediate
sufficient unto itself	
spontaneous	spontaneous manifestations
pleasure of immediate sensation	tumultous and impulsive exuberance
low significance preferred	pleasant
synergies sought	
make-believe prevalent	make-believe
high arousal preferred	uncontrolled fantasy
high intensity preferred	readily carried to excess

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